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## Leading in positive

Iñigo de la Serna

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# “Leadership is a long-term career”



## Iñigo de la Serna |

Partner of Seeliger y Conde and former Minister of Public Works.

Iñigo de la Serna left politics in July 2018 to work in the private sector. The former Mayor of Santander and Minister of Public Works now engages in the pursuit and development of executive talent at the firm Seeliger y Conde. We talked to him about liquid talent and the importance of finding the right professional for each business project.

**You have a wealth of experience in politics and the business environment. From that standpoint, how should a person prepare to be a leader?**

**What, in your opinion, are the keys to leadership?**

People are not born leaders, they become leaders. That is why it is very important for anyone who has a leadership vocation, either in the public or private sector, to take the necessary steps to reach that position of leadership. This could mean training, acquiring certain skills in the position they occupy, whatever is required to reach that position of leadership. It is a job that requires time and dedication; it is not a short-term career. The most important thing is the ability to identify your strengths and weaknesses and to address those deficiencies over the course of time.

**In today's ever-changing environment, in which everything seems to have major public repercussions, what messages or thoughts would you share with young people aspiring to lead projects, companies, political parties, governments; in short, positions of responsibility?**

It is difficult to give a recommendation. First, I would tell them to raise their hand; it is a good idea to raise your hand when you believe an opportunity has arisen. It is

a mistake to shut yourself away and think that because you have not got all the skills; you are not ready to take on certain leadership roles or certain responsibilities.

Second, you have to realise it is a long road, as I already mentioned, and it is important to work on yourself, on training. Everything cannot be entrusted to the company; for example, we cannot expect the company to provide us with an Executive Development Programme (EDP) or a coach to develop certain skills. We are ultimately responsible for ourselves and for understanding what we aim to achieve.

**In the area of corporate responsibility, how should a leader approach their company's good governance and corporate responsibility?**

I believe that the Company leader or CEO has to faithfully represent that good governance. The ultimate objective of companies today is not profitability, but rather being true to the values of the company and providing society with a service. That is the road to economic profitability associated with the business activity itself.

Consequently, the CEO must embody those company values; their function covers more than just the

statement of profit or loss. They must be able to transmit the meaning of the brand and the aims of the company to society at large. The executive manager is therefore closely associated with the reputational value of the company and the corporate responsibility that also resides in the business.

That is why the CEO is no longer just a manager in the economic sense of the word, as might have been the case a few years ago; he now represents an entire brand in society.

**In the political arena the charisma of leaders is often decisive. What role do ethics, values and principles play in political leadership?**

Well I believe that all political leaders and company executives should hold these values. I do not really know what charisma is, and neither would I have the audacity to precisely define leadership, because any leadership values must also fit in with the company's own values.

The same person may be a good leader at one company and a terrible leader at another because they do not have the required qualities and skills. For example, when we work at Seeliger y Conde to identify good candidates in a search process, what we do first is gain a good understanding of the company's strategic plan, the experience of the company in the industry, and the challenges and difficulties it is going to encounter, and on this basis we assemble a series of competences to try to precisely cover those matters that are decisive for the company.

It is not therefore possible to talk in general terms about what those values are. Clearly ethics, values and principles must play a role, but so should many others, irrespective of whether we are in the public or private domain.

It is also true that a good politician and a person doing a great job in the public sector could be a terrible manager in the private sector and, conversely, an outstanding CEO at a company could enter the political arena and not understand that here the drivers of the business are different and there are components that do not fall within the business rationale. However, when viewed together major differences do not, or should not, exist because it is a question of managing a company for certain purposes or of managing public assets, with a public service vocation, for other purposes that are related to society as a whole.

**Innovation has become one of the biggest levers of growth. How can we innovate in the area of leadership and people management?**

The first thing is to understand is that the key element in an innovation and digital transformation process is not the software or the technological tools, it is the talent. Certain reports that we have seen on the future of employment present astonishing surveys that tell us that companies are unable to find up to 72% of the professionals that they require. This draws attention to matters related to education, but also to the lack of certain profiles needed by companies at this moment in time.

In our case, we are on occasion asked for a professional profile that has a wealth of experience in managing people, and also an international track record, because they are going to be an important executive, and they must also be an expert in cybersecurity. The problem is that this profile does not yet exist because experts in cybersecurity do not have a fifteen-year track record to validate that experience in managing people.

In short, it is a question of identifying the values pursued within the company and working for them.

**How do you think the role of leader has changed? What is needed now that was not required a few years ago?**

There is a clear evolution. I am sure that if we observe and listen to any of today's CEOs and the way in which they approach their daily work, it will have little in common with a traditional CEO at a Spanish company. In today's changing world, matters such as a long-term view, understanding and correctly interpreting what is going on in the industry and an ability to anticipate events are important.

“Leadership values must be an excellent fit with the company's own values”

“The same person may be a good leader at one company and a terrible leader at another because they do not have the required qualities and skills”

As is everything related to teamwork and networking. CEOs used to interact with two or three executives on the next level down, and now a hierarchy of that nature no longer exists. In addition, flexible methodologies are clearly beginning to be implemented at companies, as are the top competences of all, soft skills.

In other words, although technical knowledge is still important, today's executive managers are required to have other qualities such as an ability to cope well with stress, conduct good negotiations, empathy, communication skills, etc., questions that are related more to the liquid society and, therefore, to liquid leadership, than to autocratic leadership.

However, I would repeat what I said earlier, that does not mean liquid leadership is appropriate for all companies at all times. For example, autocratic leadership could well be more suitable for a company involved in a merger or major restructuring process. That is why it is important not to limit leadership to a single adjective; we need to understand that we live in a changing society in which leaders have to mould companies so that they adapt to what is happening in that society and use their leadership positions to empower professionals.

#### **Is there a leader you especially admire?**

I am not keen on myth-making, although I do think there are great leaders. One comes to mind in the world of sport; Rafael Nadal. Although it might sound stereotypical, I think he possesses a series of attributes that characterise natural leadership. At least in the sense in which I understand leadership, as defined by Bill George in a book entitled Discover Your True North. In the book he explains that leadership and leadership qualities are inherent to people and the only thing they have to do is first, be able to identify them and, second, direct their leadership style precisely in the direction in which their internal compass guides them. In other words, be true to yourself.

Leaders can never abandon those things they truly believe in or their natural abilities. On that basis, they must strive to lead the management of a company in the direction in which their internal compass guides them. But that faith in yourself is essential in order to become an authentic leader. A person striving to exercise a leadership style that is unrelated to their personality or view of things will end up being a terrible leader.

From my standpoint, Rafa Nadal is an authentic person, honest, hard-working and true to himself from the start, and he understands perfectly how to expand that leadership calmly and naturally, even outside the world of sport. I think he is a good role model.

#### **Moving on now to training, what are a leader's main training needs? What technical and emotional aspects should executive training stress in the current context?**

Training is an essential part of a company. This means understanding that the person in charge of talent and professional development must be on the management committee. I can no longer conceive of a human resources manager or personnel manager who does not actively participate and get involved in the design of the company's strategy. If this was not the case, from my standpoint the company would be neglecting a substantial portion of what should be the road map for fulfilling the objectives of that strategic plan.

First the training area must be given a prominent role and, from then on, it is necessary work intensively to find the best plans adapted to the needs of each person. One person will require a coach, another an advanced course in finance, another just a course to improve their English, another programmes for personal productivity and to improve various matters related to the way they deal with problems, etc. This is what the talent area has to identify.

This has a lot to do with our education system. I believe we have to be critical or self-critical here in relation to the gap that exists between the training offered by the traditional education system and the actual needs of the business sector. This is something I would emphasise. I believe a political and social consensus is required to include these new and necessary profiles in the education system. There are already degrees in data analytics, cybersecurity and business intelligence, but I think we still need to go further to escape the traditional approach to education and direct it towards something more in line with the actual needs of our companies.

Nevertheless, companies have to work to retain talent without neglecting the fact that it is the responsibility of professionals to take care of their education. Many young people are no longer only motivated by salaries; they also value other things such as a more flexible timetable, remote working or projects that enthuse them; this also forms part of the training.

**In relation to what you said about the difficulty of finding the ideal profile for a specific position, if you could describe the profile of the most complete leader or executive, what three qualities would they have?**

I think that leader or senior executive would have to be the one best able to achieve and comply with the values of the company. That is the ultimate objective. Consequently, if that is the ultimate objective, first and foremost, that leader has to fulfil those values. If they improve profitability and have other leadership skills,

but at the end of the day are not complying with the values or the mission of the company, they are not doing what they should be doing.

Secondly, having the ability to empower professionals reporting to them through the use of their influence; in other words, understanding their relationship with the team in a more horizontal and natural way. I think that would be another factor of note in a leader.

I could go on and mention some others, but in my opinion those are the two main qualities. However, leaders, as the word suggests, have to take the team with them, so if I had to suggest a third quality I would return to the idea of being true to yourself. In today's world, leaders are who they are rather than what they do to fulfil their mission at their company or in the public sector.

“The key element in an innovation process is not the software, it is the talent”

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